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ASPET: Science in the Sky

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Lake Forest College students attended the 22nd annual meeting of the American Society for Pharmacology and Experimental Therapeutics: Great Lakes chapter. Pictured on the bottom row from left to right: Peter Sullivan, Danny Sanchez, Keith Solvang, Kayla Ahlstrand, Ray Choi, Stephanie Feld, Ejaz Ali. Middle row: Mike Fiske, Carlos Becerra. Top row: Jaime Pérez. Not pictured: Natalie Simak and Daryn Cass.

As I stepped out of the car onto Lake Shore Drive on a blazing July day, I thought back to when I first started my career as a budding scientist. Only a short while ago I was learning about action potentials and mitosis; I never imagined I would be attending a scientific meeting, and I did not know what to expect. I briefly noticed the butterflies in my stomach. As I crossed the busy street, a group of Lake Forest College students caught my eye. To my relief, I saw many familiar faces. Together, we entered the University of Chicago's Gleacher Center, a multi-story skyscraper in the heart of Chicago, for the 22nd annual meeting of the Great Lakes Chapter American Society for Pharmacology and Experimental Therapeutics (GLC-ASPET).

ASPET has been held annually at academic institutions around the Chicago area since it was founded in 1987. The ASPET organization was created to further the growth and development of new medicines and therapeutic agents to fight existing and emerging diseases. Annual meetings are held to encourage scientific communication among researchers interested in pharmacology.

Here we were, a group of undergraduate students from a small liberal arts school, surrounded by academics and scientists who work in the industry. The twelve of us crammed into an elevator and up we went; there was no turning back now. *Ding*. The doors slid open and for a moment I stood in anticipation, watching the scene of a scientific conference unfold before my eyes. The room was small and filled with poster easels and scientists. The three presenters from our group, Daryn Cass '10, Michael Fiske '10, and Ray Choi '09, quickly picked up their nametags and scrambled to pin up the posters they carried with them. Although there were undergraduates from schools all around the Midwest including Purdue and the University of Iowa, Lake Forest College represented the majority of the undergraduate participants. We were a team, a team that bonded over our love of science and that supported each

other in our scientific endeavors.

10:00 a.m. It was time for the undergraduate poster symposium to begin. Daryn, Michael, and Ray stood poised next to their notable posters, while the rest of us remained nearby. Soon I could see three judges making their way through the crowd, and I knew that the stakes were just raised. All of the undergraduates were competing against one another for first, second, and third place, with winners receiving monetary rewards. We traveled from poster to poster as a group, like some kind of LFC posse. We watched Daryn present her research from an internship she was involved in at Rosalind Franklin University of Medicine and Science's cellular and pharmacology laboratory. As we listened to Daryn compare the neurological effects of cocaine injections on infant and adult rats, I noticed a tiny grin turning up the corners of her mouth.

We continued making our way through the room until we got to Michael's poster. He was presenting his senior thesis work from Dr. DebBurman's laboratory at Lake Forest College. We stood there as the judges grilled him with questions about alanine-76 in alpha-synuclein aggregation and phosphorylation. After what seemed like an endless ten minutes of question and answer exchanges, the judges seemed pleased; they moved on to the next poster as we cheered and high-fived Michael for his thorough and convincing answers. There remained one more presenter we were all waiting to see: Ray, who was also presenting his senior thesis work from Dr. DebBurman's laboratory. As Ray explained how alpha-synuclein can be degraded via macroautophagy, I looked around and noticed that nine students, as well as two judges, were all crowded around Ray's poster; it was as if the Lake Forest College presenters had brought with them their own personal cheerleading squad. It was not our quantity that made us stand out; it was the excitement we shared in watching our peers, classmates, and friends show off all of their hard work.

12:00 pm. Sitting around a large circular table at lunchtime, the twelve of us enjoyed all of the delicious food that conferences have to offer. As we talked about the morning's posters and anticipated the afternoon's seminars, Dr. DebBurman announced that we would be taking a group picture. This would be the dreaded Daily Click picture that is a hallmark of all Lake Forest College scientific gatherings. It is always captured by Dr. DebBurman and is always preceded by a loud collective groan from the students. *One. Two. Three. Click!*

1:00 pm. We filed into the conference rooms to await the afternoon seminars. Some seminars provided advice on career-related topics. For instance, one seminar included a panel of professionals who discussed the paths they took with a pharmacology degree. In addition, there were several seminars focusing on particular diseases, such as Parkinson's disease. After the presidential speaker presented, it was time for the award ceremony.

We were all waiting anxiously for the award ceremony to begin. Would any of the Lake Forest presenters be the winners of ASPET? As the organization's president stood in the center of the room preparing to announce the winners of the undergraduate poster symposium, I noticed us all on the edge of our seats, eager to find out who would get the prize. I listened as the president announced, "Daryn Cass, from Lake Forest College, wins the third place prize." As Daryn stood up to receive her award, an outburst of cheering and clapping filled the room. I could see genuine pride on all of our faces as we left ASPET that day feeling like winners.

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